Commonplace Books

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A *commonplace book* is a writer's personal collection of quotations, observations, and topic ideas. Also known as *topos koinos* (Greek) and *locus communis* (Latin).

Called *florilegia* ("flowers of reading") in the Middle Ages, commonplace books were especially popular during the Renaissance and well into the 18th century. For some writers, blogs serve as contemporary versions of commonplace books.

Examples and Observations

- "It was none other than the foremost Humanist of his day, Erasmus, in his *De copia* of 1512, who set the mold for making commonplace books, in a passage advising how to store collections of illustrative examples in retrievable form. One should make oneself a notebook divided by place-headings, then subdivided into sections. The headings should relate to 'things of particular note in human affairs' or to the main types and subdivisions of vices and virtues."
  -(Ann Moss, "Commonplace Books." *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. by T.O. Sloane. Oxford University Press, 2001)
- "Cobbled together by literate people, commonplace books served as repositories for whatever someone thought fit to record: medical recipes, jokes, verse, prayers, mathematical tables, aphorisms, and especially passages from letters, poems, or books."
  (Arthur Krystal, "Too True: The Art of the Aphorism." *Except When I Write*. Oxford University Press, 2011)
- "*Clarissa Harlowe*. Have read 1/3 of. Long books, when read, are usually overpraised, because the reader wants to convince others and himself that he has not wasted his time."
  (E.M. Forster in 1926, excerpt from *Commonplace Book*, ed. by Philip Gardner. Stanford University Press, 1988)

Reasons to Keep a Commonplace Book

- "Professional writers still carry notebooks that resemble commonplace books. In keeping with this practice, we suggest that aspiring rhetors carry a notebook with them so that they can write down ideas that occur to them while they are engaged in doing other things. And when you are reading, or talking, or listening to others, you can use the notebook as a commonplace book, writing down comments or passages that you want to remember, copy, or imitate."
  (Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. Pearson, 2004)
  "The commonplace book derived its name from the ideal of a 'common place' where useful ideas or arguments might be gathered. . . .
  "[T]here are still good reasons for writers to keep commonplace books the old-fashioned way. In copying by hand a masterful construction from another writer, we can inhabit the words, grasp their rhythms and, with some luck, learn a little something about how good writing is made. . . .
  "Author Nicholson Baker writes of keeping a commonplace book that 'it makes me a happier person: My own bristling brain-urchins of worry melt in the strong solvent of other people's grammar.' It's a lovely passage, and I couldn't help entering it into my own commonplace book."
  (Danny Heitman, "A Personal Trove of Prose." *The Wall Street Journal*, October 13-14, 2012)

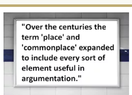
William H. Gass on Ben Jonson's Commonplace Book

- "When Ben Jonson was a small boy, his tutor, William Camden, persuaded him of the virtue of keeping a commonplace book: pages where an ardent reader might copy down passages that especially pleased him, preserving sentences that seemed particularly apt or wise or rightly formed and that would, because they were written afresh in a new place, and in a context of favor, be better remembered, as if they were being set down at the same time in the memory of the mind. Here were more than turns of phrase that could brighten an otherwise-gloomy page. Here were statements that seemed so directly truthful they might straighten a warped soul on seeing them again, inscribed, as they were, in a child's wide round trusting hand, to be read and reread like the propositions of a primer, they were so bottomed and basic."
  (William H. Gass, "A Defense of the Book." *A Temple of Texts*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2006)

Commonplace Books and the Web

- "John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Coleridge and Jonathan Swift all kept [commonplace] books, copying down proverbs, poems and other wisdom they encountered while reading. So did many women, often excluded from public discourse at the time. By appropriating others' nuggets, writes cultural historian Robert Darnton, 'you made a book of your own, one stamped with your personality.'
  "In a recent Columbia University lecture, the writer Steven Johnson drew parallels between commonplace books and the web: blogging, Twitter and social bookmarking sites such as StumbleUpon are often held to have sparked a renaissance of the form. . . . As with commonplace books, this linking and sharing create not just a hodgepodge, but something coherent and original: 'When text is free to combine in new, surprising ways, new forms of value are created."
  (Oliver Burkeman, "Make a Book of Your Own." *The Guardian*, May 29, 2010)

Cite this Article



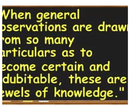
What Is Rhetoric and Commonplace in English Grammar?

Copia and Copiousness in Rhetoric

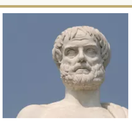
What Is Reposition Stranding in Grammar?

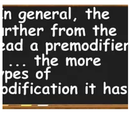
Band vs. Banned: How to Use the Right Word

Rhetoric: Definitions and Observations


When general observations are drawn from so many particulars as to become certain and indubitable, these are jewels of knowledge."
Induction (Logic and Rhetoric)

Family Slang


Decorum in Rhetoric


Premodifiers in Grammar

Defining "Symbol" in Language and Literature

What Is a Colloquialism?

What Is a Second Language (L2)?

Definition and Examples of the Topoi in Rhetoric

Characteristics of a Formal Prose Style

Modern English (language)

Definition and Uses of the Definite Article 'the' in English